Exploring the Journey and Perspectives of Women County Executives in Tennessee

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Abstract

The need for equal gender representation is crucial at local political levels. Of the 95 counties in Tennessee, only three currently have women county executives, and this representation is even less than in 2022 when five counties were led by women in the executive role. Although women account for only 19.8% of county chief executive officers nationwide, Tennessee falls well below the average with a mere 3.2% representation across all counties. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and better understand the professional journeys of women county executives in Tennessee. Three themes emerged from analysis of the data: the nurturing/caregiving nature of women, the importance of political parties, and the impact on children. The study expands the current knowledge base on the career progression of elected women to help equalize women's presence in county government across the state.

Keywords

1. Introduction

The 2020 election marked significant achievements for women in federal office, including the historic election of the first woman and woman of color as vice president, a record number of women elected to the 117th Congress, and unprecedented representation of republican women and women of color in the U.S. House of Representatives. Despite these gains, women remain underrepresented in U.S. elected positions, holding less than 29% of seats in the 117th Congress and only 25% in the 117th Senate (Center for American Women and Politics, 2023). Achieving full and equal involvement of women in legislatures is

crucial for inclusive democracy, ensuring responsiveness to public demands, equal representation, and benefiting from diverse leadership styles and perspectives (Schachter, 2020).

The need for equal representation is particularly crucial at local levels, where women account for only 19.8% of county chief executive officers nationwide, and Tennessee falls well below the average (International City/County Management Association, 2019). The Tennessee Constitution mandates that each county elect its own executive official, known as the county mayor. Once every four years—during the normal August election (which also includes the governor's election—the office of county executive is chosen by popular vote, and the incumbent is eligible for an unlimited number of terms (County Technical Assistance Services, 2023). The county's chief executive officer is the county mayor, also known as the county executive in some instances. The county mayor oversees the county's financial management, as well as other administrative duties, and they also play a leadership role in county administration.

The few women county leaders are unique in that they have obtained positions where so many others have not (County Technical Assistance Services, 2023). Although the workforce generally has become more representative of the population in terms of gender, women county executives in Tennessee remain underrepresented. This study was designed to obtain information on the lived experiences of women serving as executive leaders in their communities. The objective of the study was to provide insight on strategies to support and advance the career progression of elected female officials, helping equalize women's presence in county governments.

2. Literature Review

The concept of representation and social role theory theoretically guided the study. The first section of the literature review focuses on representation within the context of the government workforce and demonstrates why gender difference is important in government organizations. The second section focuses on social role theory as it relates to government employees' social experiences that emphasize the necessity for a government, state, or community to create a staff that reflects and represents the public. Together, representation and social role theory comprise the study's theoretical foundation: representative bureaucracy.

2.1. Representation

Researchers have defined representativeness in a variety of ways. The phrase "representative bureaucracy" was first used by Kingsley in 1945 (Kingsley, 1945), when he made the case that "bureaucracies, to be democratic, must be representative of the communities they serve" (p. 282). Expanding on Kingsley's ideas, Mosher (1968) proposed that representativeness has two meanings: active and passive. The idea that a representative would seek the interests and wishes of the people they serve is known as active or responsible representativeness. On

the other hand, passive or sociological representativeness involves the background of the individuals and their capacity to reflect or mirror society (Mosher, 1968).

The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 was created to provide federal management the freedom to enhance the efficiency and productivity of the government while simultaneously safeguarding employees from unfair or unjustified actions. A planned and authorized restructuring of the entities responsible for managing the federal personnel system was part of civil service reform (Bersch & Fukuyama, 2022). Later, President Obama's Executive Order 13583, issued in 2011, was meant to provide the stimulus for a concerted, federal-wide effort to advance diversity and inclusion in the workforce. This directive furthered the government's commitment to equal employment opportunities (Borry et al., 2021). Since then, the idea of a diversified public workforce has been accepted and developed in the literature, where there is empirical evidence that a mixture of social experiences is seen to positively enhance both private and public organizations (Gay, 2019; Maturo et al., 2019; Shill, 2022).

According to U.S. demographic estimates, there will be a greater diversity of people than in the past (Shill, 2022). Hence, hiring practices that encourage a varied workforce are crucial for the public's perception of the legitimacy of both government and private companies (Bollavaram, 2021). However, women and minorities are still disproportionately underrepresented in higher-level professional and elected positions and are still primarily concentrated in lower-level professions, such as clerical and blue-collar careers (Riccucci, 2021).

2.2. Social Role Theory

Theis and Nipper (2021) offered social role theory to explain female executives' impact on corporate-level decision-making. Social role theory holds that women and men behave differently not because of genetic differences but because of gendered societal expectations (Kaufmann, 2022; Wiedman, 2020). Theis and Nipper used gender roles as a term for the social roles society designates for men and women. Originally, research on social role theory has focused on objective criteria such as hiring data and performance assessments. However, recent research involving social role theory has focused on women's subjective experiences to better understand their viewpoints and career-advancement strategies, as well as how gender stereotypes are experienced in the workplace (Eagly et al., 2020).

The difficulty of gender stereotypes has been a continuous subject in public administration, wherein research shows that women must often work more and longer than men to establish themselves and are frequently assessed by higher standards (Haque & Yamin, 2020). When a female manager gets promoted, for example, and finds herself in a setting dominated by men, it conveys the stereotypical message that women do not belong there and that she is an exception to the rule (Fisk & Oveton, 2019). When women transcend traditional gender lines

and operate in agentic ways, they face backlash and animosity because they have broken a gender role that is designated for men (Boussalis et al., 2021; Hamori et al., 2022; Rua et al., 2021). Although men are supposed to demonstrate leadership or aggressive qualities, women are perceived as *uppity* when they exhibit the same behaviors (Krook, 2019; Ladam et al., 2018). Even when women leaders have surpassed the glass ceiling, they encountered a new obstacle called the "glass cliff," which refers to women at higher echelons of organizations being placed in higher-risk positions compared to men (Moon et al., 2022).

The overall effect of women's employment experiences is that they send a strong signal dissuading them from pursuing leadership positions. Although each woman may react differently to such unfavorable assumptions, forward-thinking leaders and organizations can successfully traverse these prejudices (Dolan & Hansen, 2018). If government organizations want to raise the proportion of women in leadership positions, it is necessary to better understand the experiences of the women who hold these crucial positions. The notion of a representative bureaucracy accepts women's social experiences and views them as advantageous in the public sector (Baskaran & Hessami, 2022).

3. Methods

The researchers employed qualitative research with the intent to focus on participants' interaction, language, and life experiences. This theme involved nuances of behaviors and attitudes perceived through the subjects' lived experience. In-depth interviews were deemed a useful tool to explore participants' experiences and discover why and how they ran for the public office of county executive. Interviews are accepted among scholars as an effective instrument of data collection in qualitative research (Cheron et al., 2022; Bulus & Dong, 2021). Others have stated that the use of qualitative interviews permits a researcher to concentrate on collecting in-depth data from a comparatively small participant sample (Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). The informal nature of face-to-face interviews permits a researcher to acquire an improved understanding of the participants' experiences, without associating predetermined constraints with the participant's responses (Bulus & Dong, 2021). Other scholars have explored women's leadership utilizing a qualitative process (Ladam et al., 2018; Maturo, Migliori, & Paolone, 2019, Rua et al., 2021; Shill, 2022). The data collection process involved interviewing women leaders which was similar to the method for this study.

This phenomenological study sought to explore and better understand the professional journeys of women county executives in Tennessee, following others who have used this method to better understand participants' experiences, values, and actions in the context of women within leadership positions in government (Alberti et al., 2022; Baskaran & Hessami, 2022; Funk & Philips, 2019; Liu, 2018).

The researchers interviewed four of the five women who were currently elected to and serving in the role of either county mayor or county executive in

the State of Tennessee as of January 1, 2022. The four women who were willing to participate were provided with necessary documentation for participation.

3.1. Participants

The sample for this study was four of the five county executives who were in office in Tennessee as of January 1, 2022, using purposeful sampling to approach potential participants who have the desired characteristics for the study (Lakens, 2022), specifically that they were either female county executives in south-central Tennessee or were women county mayors in Tennessee. Scholarly saturation was achieved due to the 80% participation rate. Participants were interviewed virtually via TEAMS, using an interview protocol of 29 standardized questions, to avoid loud noises and other interruptions and to keep the participant's information confidential. Before starting the interview, contributors signed a document confirming their agreement to participate in the study. The participants contributed to the study of their own free will and accord.

3.2. Data Analysis

Once the interviews were conducted, the recordings were then evaluated, employing phenomenological methods (Neubauer et al., 2019), and checked by another researcher who provided feedback (Creswell, 2012). The interviews were transcribed to facilitate analysis. Each participant's significant words and phrases were noted and categorized. Next, these categories were combined to create meaning clusters. By arranging these essential statements and their meaning in various ways, phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) revealed recurring themes and experiences. These categorizations or themes were honed into a thorough narrative of participants' experiences of the phenomena with the addition of firsthand quotes from participants (Prosek & Gibson, 2021).

4. Results and Discussion

The participants varied in age, education level, and if they were originally from the areas they served. Interviewees ranged from age 42 to 64. Education level ranged from a high school education to a master's degree. Two participants had lived in their areas of service their entire lives. Another reported living in her respective area of service for 17 years, and another had lived in her area of service for 43 years.

The analysis provided three major themes: the nurturing/caregiving nature of women, the importance of political parties, and the impact on children. Statements of significance and meaning were refined to create a central topic or theme, which are discussed below.

4.1. Theme 1: Nurturing/Caregiving

All four interviewees believed that being a woman in the executive position was an advantage at times primarily due to the nurturing, comforting, and caregiving

nature of women. None of the interviewees believed that being a woman in the executive role was a detriment. Participant 2 said, "I did my best to 'mother' the county." There was also a strong connection and importance placed on listening skills to facilitate those properties. These characteristics align with what is expected of women according to social role theory. The comments show that the participants are being influenced by gender role expectations. Gender expectations can shape an individual's beliefs or attitude about themselves because gender expectations and gender stereotypes drive people to believe unfounded opinions about men and women (Kaufmann, 2022). These preconceived notions can impact opinions regarding an individual's abilities, even when there is contradictory evidence (Msosa et al., 2022). Theis and Nipper (2021) argued that through social interactions and experiences, women learn that they are to be communal or concerned primarily with the welfare of others. This could be an additional obstacle for women leaders who seek the mantle of leadership.

This finding also aligns with social role theory, which suggests there is a perceived discrepancy between the qualities of an effective leader and those associated with women's gender roles. Men and women are socialized into different social roles as adults. Women are expected to possess community qualities such as being affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle (Baskaran & Hessami, 2022). In contrast, men are socialized to be assertive, confident, or controlling. All skills are normally associated with the characteristics of a good leader (Theis & Nipper, 2021). Participant 3 supported this conclusion when she said that "people expect a male mayor" and she often receives emails addressed as "Mr. (name omitted)." Participant 4 also said that, on numerous occasions when receiving phone calls, people would ask for "Mr. (name omitted)." Additionally, Participant 1 said, "Some people still believe that a woman's place is not in the political arena."

These experiences explain why there are so few women in top-level leadership positions and are supported by others' research (Harmon & Walden, 2021). Researchers have also used social role theory to explain the implicit bias female leaders face, where women typically suffer stereotyped-based discrimination or prejudice against their leadership (Boussalis et al., 2021; Brueckner et al., 2021; Rua et al., 2021). When participants in the present study were asked what they enjoyed most in the position, the answers were similar. Participant 1 enjoyed participating and being part of local events. Participant 2 enjoyed being able to help people. Participant 3 enjoyed being able to solve problems and get results, all in the name of helping others. Participant 4 enjoyed getting to see things get done for the people of her community. It seems the Tennessee women county mayors have internalized the norms of social roles, which has created tensions between them and their jobs. So, they have accepted the traditional expectations, so much so that they see their job as an extension of their role at home and, therefore, feel like they are the mother to the county.

Although overt forms of bias have been reduced, implicit bias persists in workplace settings and in politics. Participant 1 said her job was more difficult

due to fighting the "good ole boy system." This type of prejudice sends potent social messages, resulting in varied job experiences for stigmatized groups (Fisk & Overton, 2019). Participant 1 stated that "some men at the beginning of my term would not listen and even interrupt me but would freely engage in communication with other men in meetings." She added that several have since apologized. However, the belief that women should not be in leadership does not just come from men. Participant 3 stated, "I had another woman say to me, 'I just can't vote for a woman for mayor.'" Participant 3 also said a woman said, "I think you are a great person and can do the job, but I just can't support a woman."

When some read about social role theory, they view it as another attempt to shape or stop someone from performing the role assigned. However, Participant 1 added,

> Even prior to being in the executive role, men would approach me wanting to know the "female perspective." A woman is often a mother and is therefore nurturing and acts as a caregiver. I try to keep the county safe, happy, and healthy.

Participant 3 had a similar experience and stated, "People would seek out my opinion from a female perspective. Women possess a different outlook. Women want to fix problems. Women are compassionate. I mothered the county."

The perception of women leaders being nurturing aligns with social role theory and is contrasted and complemented in the research on men leaders being patriarchal. Miyen and April (2022) studied the experiences of women managers in the South African mining industry and found that women in management positions often think of men in positions above them as father figures. This perception represents a combination of transference and cultural influence created by the societal patriarchal system (Miyen & April, 2022). Miyen and April also argued that the lack of support for women leaders within the industry and the glass ceiling phenomenon created a situation wherein the participants felt their only real recourse for career growth was to make a concentrated effort to play into their social roles and be nurturing.

Additionally, Lorello et al. (2020) examined women leaders in academic anesthesiology and found that women who adopt masculine leadership styles were perceived as being more competent but at the cost of being less liked. Furthermore, those who displayed a traditional feminine leadership style, especially a nurturing style, were perceived as less technically capable but better at handling other issues (Lorello et al., 2020). Lorello et al. concluded that social role theory continues to hold true in that women who are in leadership positions will continue to experience prejudice because of the perceived conflict between their prescriptive and descriptive gendered social roles.

Although three of the participants were active within the community and supported youth leadership programs, none of the participants had a woman mentor. In a study on women and career advancement, Maureen (2023) found

that mentors play a pivotal role in supporting women's professional development. Maureen emphasized that the mentoring process was key for women to obtain advanced positions and overcome the challenges and biases that come with taking on leadership roles. The lack of women mentors for participants in the present study does not support recent research on the importance of women mentors for the career advancement of women (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Chasserio & Bacha, 2023; French & Eskridge, 2021; Loumpourdi, 2023; Maureen, 2023). Women in the present study indicated they obtained their positions through their political party or own endeavors.

4.2. Theme 2: Political Party

Historically, research supports that political party affiliation has a minimal effect in local elections, and in relation to partisanship, previous research on local elections has mostly focused on the significance of racial or social identification (Powell et al., 2022). One of the elements previously influencing the general disregard of political party in local elections is that many municipal and local elections appear nonpartisan, often with candidates not even declaring a party affiliation, which leads to a range of nonideological elements, such as incumbency, race, or gender, affecting voters' decisions in municipal and local elections (Sances, 2018). Researchers have long believed partisanship had little impact on municipal elections (Hopkins, 2018).

However, there has been a rise in the association between partisanship and local, state, and national elections over the last decade. Partisanship and ideology are important factors in municipal elections because of the growing ideological divide between democrats and republicans and the resulting polarization of American politics (Warshaw, 2019). A stronger correlation between partisanship has moved down from the federal and state levels and is now impacting local elections. This partisanship has caused more party-affiliated people to run for office based on national issues.

Local political parties have started providing local candidates with a national support group that provides training, resources, and marketing that is difficult for nonparty affiliates to easily overcome (Sances, 2018). Three of the four participants in the present study were affiliated with the republican party, and the other ran as an independent, who stated, "I do not feel that big party politics should play a part in our local communities' decisions." The independent candidate running for reelection was defeated by a male republican candidate who had no political or local experience, but who used that political party's national platform to garner votes locally.

Research shows that voters use gender stereotypes to appraise those running for public office, which can help women candidates in some electoral contexts but can also hurt them in others (DeSilver, 2022). Women have an advantage over men in city council but not in mayoral races; additionally, women have a larger advantage in school board races but greater disadvantages in conservative

constituencies (Anzia & Bernhard, 2022). Most of the research has focused on a single event, normally involving the United States national elections, where partisanship is strongest (Kaplan et al., 2022). These effects are most prominent during national elections when voter turnout is high due to national events, but voters tend to know less about the abilities or stances of local candidates (De-Silver, 2022).

The United States is becoming increasingly defined by its and the voters' political identity, which is based on social identity theory (Mönke et al., 2023). Now politics must appeal to a voter's social and political identity. Accordingly, political information and option processing depends not just on political identity, but also on other identities, such as gender, race, or sexuality. The political identity more strongly motivates group members to vote for a person with a connection to the group. During these cycles, it could be easier for women who have political aspirations to use a political party to help offset other biases. Many elections are decided in the primaries (Ashton et al., 2023). Women candidates must only appeal to and win over the local party or that party's leadership to win office. This process will not eliminate gender issues, but in a society where a political party is becoming its own form of identity, it can become a great asset.

Ladam et al. (2018) found it was vital for women politicians to mentor and support other women candidates for both local and federal offices, as well as mentor them once elected. However, none of the participants of the present study had women mentors. Because it is unlikely that a woman politician would mentor someone from another party, Ladam's finding suggests political parties are mentoring women candidates and not women politicians. It now appears that a woman looking to obtain elected positions at local levels could rely on political partisanship as a substitute for mentoring.

4.3. Theme 3: The Impact on Children

All of those interviewed felt the impact on their children was the main reason more women do not run for office. Participant 1 reported that the county executive role is a high-pressure job that never stops, which takes a toll on children and other family members. Participant 4 said that your family and children will pay a toll during an election and during the term of service. Participant 3 stated that women typically play multiple support roles in raising a family and feel like they can have both only at the expense of their families.

Additionally, all participants also said that the global Covid-19 pandemic had been difficult on everyone, but due to their positions, it seemed to have a larger impact on their families due to the time they were away because of additional work responsibilities and the additional stress at the time. The pandemic created more work for the county mayors and required more time away from their families, and three participants stated they were not running for reelection because of the pandemic. Additionally, during the pandemic, people were hostile and aggressive, especially on social media. Participant 3 stated, "The social media as-

pect—particularly the negativity that is generated—is extremely disheartening to me and my family." Participant 2 added,

> This is not a sit-down job. It is a hard job. People are cruel. I am pro social media, but there are a lot of negativisms that everyone reads on social media, and that is hurtful. You have to have a stronger backbone than you ever dreamed of. People continually say false and mean things and do hurtful things.

One participant even had her and her children's lives threatened online.

During the pandemic, companies and organizations were forced or willingly had their employees work remotely. This included schools in the United States that were forced to move to "distance learning" (Melika et al., 2022). Parents were forced to work from home while their children were also at home learning remotely (Lichard et al., 2019). However, none of the participants took a leave of absence to help their children and continued to work in their public office. Women continue to manage most domestic and childcare responsibilities despite an increase in female participation in full-time paid professions (Stephenson et al., 2023). Due to contemporary gender conventions that still see domestic chores as primarily the domain of women, working women are under great pressure to negotiate and balance their home and work obligations (Stephenson et al., 2023). Purcell et al. (2022) found that gender inequality at home remains despite professional women's efforts to juggle household duties, like childcare and school runs, with full-time employment.

The findings in this theme largely support previous research. For instance, Haines and McKeown (2023) explored the perceived obstacles women face in healthcare leadership and found that work-life balance and the impact on family and children were major challenges. Young et al. (2023) examined the work-life balance and influence of occupational characteristics of information technology professionals and found that women were more likely than men to align occupational commitment to work-life balance with its implications for the family. Theme 3 confirms that family issues are still major concerns for women in demanding leadership positions in politics and other fields.

5. Conclusion

Before deciding to run for office, a potential female candidate must ask herself a few questions. Running for public office is a major time and energy commitment not to be taken lightly and thus the decision should not be made in a vacuum. Additionally, if potential candidates have young children, it can be difficult to manage the time required for campaigning and government work. That does not mean women should not run for office, but they may choose to wait a few years until the children are older. The statistics speak for themselves; it is going to be a difficult journey for women to complete successfully, and the journey will be more difficult if they are unable to allocate the time or energy to have a success-

ful political career.

The State of Tennessee elected three women county executives in 2022, and all three ran as republicans. It appears that, like other areas of the United States, Tennessee has shed its nonpartisan views in local elections and primaries in determining who will hold offices. Additional studies are required to see if local women leaders wishing to be politically successful should align themselves with the party that is dominating their area of interest. Additionally, more research is recommended on whether political parties realize there is a lack of women leadership and mentoring, as well as on the need to focus on recruiting and training women leaders for key positions. The use of a political party provides associations with the capacity to organize at a scale that is difficult to match at the local level.

There are areas of potential future research, and several are apparent. Many of the women in this study were mayors in predominantly republican counties, so it would add to the body of knowledge to investigate other states to see if women county mayors have different or similar experiences in non-republican counties. Furthermore, researchers could examine the leadership experiences of other women county mayors during the global pandemic to see if those experiences had a similar effect and compare those experiences to men who held the same position.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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